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POPULAR ERRORS REGARDING HEALTH.

BY DR. WILLIAM S. SEARLE.

BULWER has somewhere said that, "when a lie once gets into the world, it is astonishing how hard it is to get it out. You may beat it about the head until it seems to have given up the ghost, and then, the next day, meet it on the street as healthy as ever." Nevertheless, lies of all sorts should be clubbed at every opportunity. Else how shall truth prevail?

On scarcely any subject are more false notions current than on that of health; and among these few are more commonly accepted than this: that a changeable climate is an unhealthful one. "What horrible weather!" "How can any one keep well in the midst of such sudden and frequent changes!!" "It is a wonder we do not all die!!!" Such expressions are trite, and on the lips of even intelligent and educated people.

Our most variable and trying season is that of spring. And it is true (as is proved by the census) that it forms the most fatal quarter of the year. Then consumption reaps its harvest. The old and feeble succumb. Even the fierce heats of summer, if unaccompanied by epidemics, do not destroy so many lives. But are these results justly and wholly chargeable to the violent atmospheric changes of this season? By no means. Other factors are at work here which at present we have no space to discuss.

But let us look for a time at the reverse of the picture. No life at all could have birth or continuance without the stimulus of external forces. All life would be extinguished were the swing of these forces too widely extended. Life, on the average, is longest and best where a happy medium between death-like stagnation and volcanic explosion of natural forces exists. Let there be no change marked by the thermometer or barometer; let the sun always shine or never shed his blessed beams; let

electricity and magnetism be withdrawn, and how quickly would this globe be depopulated !

On the other hand, who could survive a doubled range of heat and cold ? What form of animal or plant life could withstand reduplication of any of the natural forces which environ mankind ? The question, then, is narrowed to this : What climate most nearly approaches the aforesaid happy medium which is conducive to the most perfect health, as well as the greatest longevity ? The appeal must needs be to facts of a comparative nature, as to which, unfortunately, we are but partially informed. Concerning the average duration of life in our own and other civilized lands we are pretty well instructed. But of that in countries of comparatively invariable climate we are very ignorant. No estimates of the latter are upon record.

It can scarcely be doubted, however, that in such climates as prevail in our Middle and Eastern States, modified as they are by the inventive genius and art of man, the average extent of life equals, and probably exceeds, that of any other portion of the globe. True, our population suffers from certain forms of disease from which the inhabitants of milder regions are partially or wholly exempt. But, on the other hand, they are subject to maladies to which we are strangers. Here the organs of the chest suffer most; there those of the abdomen. They have also to endure malaria in its more violent forms, as well as fevers, both endemic and epidemic, which are here unknown. When, therefore, we take into account the greater number and severity of the diseases to which dwellers in invariable climates are exposed, and rightly estimate the protections from inclement weather afforded to the feeble by our intelligent civilization, there can be little doubt that, even in respect to mere longevity, we possess a decided advantage.

But there are other and worthier ways of measuring life than by numbering its days. Life, in its fulness and richness and fruitfulness, is developed and enjoyed only where the climate is fickle. The ambition, energy, inventiveness, and general capacity which have made our civilization what it is, and which are yet to make America a greater nation than the world has seen, are, to a large extent, the results of a variable climate. Henry Ward Beecher used to say that the land where no cellar was dug was the land of feebleness and inanity. Doubtless we owe much of our

development to free institutions. But we owe more to climate. It may even be doubted whether free institutions or constitutional government could have birth and growth under changeless skies. Certainly, as we understand and enjoy them, they never did so originate, for the republics of Greece and Rome were far from our ideas and realizations.

It may be set down as axiomatic that any external force applied to a living being, which is not too intense or prolonged to allow full reaction, provided that no disintegration of tissue is caused by it and that the necessary time is afforded for such reaction, is beneficial—contributes to both growth and endurance. It acts as a stimulus, awakening otherwise latent forces, and brings into fullest play the energies of both body and mind. As one creeps half-alive from his bed, after long and deep slumber, to be roused into full vitality by a shower bath, thus also do climatic changes act upon him.

It is said that to become a true poet one must experience the baptism of suffering; that one cannot be a true artist till his eyes have been opened to behold what ordinary men fail to discern; that he who would lead the mass must stand above it. All such truths find parallels in the physical sphere. He who knows what it is to get his "second wind" understands this point practically, if not philosophically. And there is a mental "second wind," as well as a physical; both, to a large extent, dependent upon climatic changes. A chilly, rainy day or week in spring time benumbs and depresses every faculty of body and mind and soul. But when it is over, and the sun bursts out, the rebound takes us to otherwise unknown and unconceived elevations. Hence the enervated inhabitants of unchangeable climes are unheard of as originators of thought and action. They exist. They do not live.

Which of the glorious achievements of man have found birth and growth in the regions so much envied by the grumblers who loudly complain of the fierce, swift buffetings of our climate? Where were born and nurtured the great poets, historians, novelists, scientists, musicians, inventors, orators, statesmen, dramatists, warriors, explorers, of earth? No sluggish air, no torrid heat, no frozen land, no changeless clime, produced them. Storms swung their cradle; rocks obstructed their footsteps; they were tossed about at the sport and whim of nature in her liveliest moods;

relaxed by heat and then benumbed by cold ; cloud and sunshine followed each other swiftly over their pathway ; they had to fight for their very existence, not gorge food ready at their hands or fallen at their feet. Thus were their natures made robust and capacious ; thus they became such men as no tepid, placid, changeless regions ever saw.

Let us, then, cease to bewail that unsteady and fickle climate which mocks "weather bureaux" and laughs prophets to scorn. Rather let us welcome the changing seasons, and praise their blessings, as well as the beauties they unfold around us.

Exceedingly common is the notion that length of life is controlled by habits, and that a careful observance of what are called good habits must necessarily insure to every one longevity. Indeed, some appear to think that such self-denying persons ought never to sicken or die.

It was my fortune, many years ago, to know a man who held to this idea and who carried out to the full such a course of life with more than ordinary consistency and intelligence. His income enabled him to completely realize his ideal. He trained his body carefully and regularly ; he had no "small vices," nor great ones ; he ate the plainest food, but it was always of the best, well prepared and abundant. Not one of those habits which are esteemed good was neglected, and those which are called bad were shunned with abhorrence. He boasted that he was never sick, and that he would live to celebrate his one-hundredth birthday. He had a neighbor of the most self-indulgent kind. He also was a man of wealth, who took no exercise beyond an occasional pleasure drive, who uniformly ate a hot and rich supper at ten o'clock at night, and of whom it was asserted that, though never drunk, he was rarely, if ever, perfectly sober. The former of these gentlemen died at sixty-four ; the latter at sixty-eight. Of the heredity of either I have no knowledge.

Now, while it would be entirely unwarrantable to argue from these facts that the former did not lengthen, nor the latter shorten, his life by his habits, these, in common with many similar instances, tend to demonstrate the truth that good habits do not necessarily insure longevity, nor bad habits surely prevent it. They enforce our opinion that too much influence of this sort is commonly attributed to each proposition, and that other and more

powerful causes determine the period of existence of individuals and of mankind.

Of these causes it is unquestionable that heredity is easily the chief. Habits have much to do with our comfort and happiness while we do live. But, given hereditary longevity, bad habits must be very bad, and steadily persisted in, to enable them to destroy life ; while, given hereditary brevity of existence, no habits, however good, can greatly prolong it.

Among my acquaintances is a woman, who some years ago, was alive at the age of ninety, and of whose decease I have not heard, who, for a large portion of her life, has been a drunkard and an opium-eater. One of her sons has been a drunkard of the most reckless type for thirty years, and during that period has aged as little as any man of my acquaintance.

Another instance which well illustrates our position came under observation in my hospital clinic. A patient complained of deafness. Inspection showed ears filled with impacted cerumen. This was easily removed, and perfect hearing restored. As a record is kept, his name and age were asked. To all outward appearances he was about fifty years old. But he claimed to be seventy five. The following conversation ensued :

“Are you sure of that?”

“Yes.”

“How old was your father when he died?”

“He is not dead yet. He is between ninety-five and one hundred.”

“How old is your mother?”

“She died at about eighty.”

“What is your business?”

“A tailor.”

“On the bench?”

“Yes.”

“All your life?”

“Yes.”

“Well, tailors have not the best reputation for habits: how is it with you?”

“About like the rest.”

“Get drunk occasionally?”

“Yes.”

“Drink coffee and tea, smoke and chew?”

"Yes."

"Ever sick?"

"Not since childhood."

Here was a man, poor, living under the worst conditions, a slave to bad habits, who did not appear to have exceeded fifty years, and who was seventy-five. Why? Solely because of heredity.

It will be found, on investigation, that this general law prevails throughout both the animal and vegetable world. Accidents excepted, plants and animals live as long as their progenitors; and this, too, under many unfavorable conditions. A striking illustration is furnished by our common domesticated birds. The parrot and canary are constructed of like tissues; they are kept in captivity; equal care is bestowed upon them; and yet, as a rule, the canary dies within ten years, while the parrot often survives one hundred. And for this most remarkable difference there is no assignable cause but heredity. Why should one flower be an annual and another a perennial? Again, heredity. Why should the elephant so long outlive the tiger or lion? Again, heredity.

That habits do influence longevity no sane man will deny. To habits more intelligent and more in consonance with nature's laws, perhaps, may justly be attributed, at least in part, the gradual increase in the average duration of life in this and other civilized countries. Our theorem is, not that there are no absolutely good and absolutely bad habits, nor that they have not an influence upon longevity; but that this influence is much less than is customarily supposed—so small, indeed, as hardly to be taken into account when compared with that of heredity.

One other phase of this subject is worthy of mention. Good habits, long persisted in, may and do become bad habits. To some this proposition may appear paradoxical. But it will become clear when we reflect that any routine in habit tends to the over-use of certain organs, and to a corresponding lack of the use of others; so that, on the one hand, the former become liable to diseases of over-excitability, while the latter are rendered liable to those of torpidity. Thus even good habits may become productive of disease. Indeed, it is so common as to be within the observation of every one that a change from such routine is conducive to health—in fact, often entirely renovates the individual.

Hence the benefits of vacations which afford an entire revolution in the scenes and employments of professional and business men. Broadly considered, change, which brings about an alteration of vital action, is the sole curative principle in disease, whether accomplished by fresh scenes, unaccustomed diet, altered habits, or drugs. As a conservator of health, too, it is preëminent.

Those, therefore, who expect to retain health or attain long life as rewards of unvarying regularity, even though in accord with the best of habits, reason unphilosophically, and rely upon insufficient and illusory causes. They overlook or fail to comprehend what may be called the doctrine of catastrophism in nature—nature, whose notorious irregularities they deprecate and bemoan—nature, which rears animals and plants, and keeps both in perfect health by the most complex, variable, and apparently lawless influences.

With the moral bearings of this subject we have no present concern, though we recognize their great importance, and the limitations which, properly understood, they impose upon all men. They are often and fully and wisely set forth by competent instructors in the family, the press, and the pulpit. Nor do we desire to lessen the force of such teachings.

Physiological truth, however, like truth of all kinds, needs no apology, nor defence, nor reticence. The only question, which is older than Pilate (nay, coeval with man), is, "What is truth?" Let that once be settled, as it can only be by free and intelligent discussion, and we need have no fear of expressing it.

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